

The Broad River Review

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The Broad River Review

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The Broad River Review

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"Frog, Monogahela National Park" — *Best College Photography 2003*
"My Father Learns to Speak (Again)" — *Crucible* and *American Diaspora*
"Dreamers" — *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse*

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THE BROAD RIVER REVIEW

And Now I Remember

There's an element missing
a heating coil to a wistful
wandering mind
There should be something simmering
rising steam and the aroma
of Sassafras tea
on the back stove eye
Takes me back to late nights
in the camp kitchen
just you and me and
the cricket breezes blowing in
the screen windows
Eating peanut butter and saltines
and waiting
for the water to turn
a darker shade of red

Remembering with too much certainty
I don't trust my own mind
maybe its just nostalgia
in disguise
filling in the gaps of what's missing
I canít help but think somehow
the moon rose slower than
the simmering pot of water
percolated to a boil
Our endless conversation
about previous college classes
sitting on the stainless steel counter
the flickering flourescent
spinning moths above us

Something is missing

a little more sugar you said
for the tea
but nothing was sweeter than
that ethereal moment
when the roots were steeping
the sap rising
so close to you I could smell
the warm amber sun in your hair
then I knew

Each summer was a lifetime
of living
ever changing, water flowing
Memories become of what we were
but thinking back
is never the same stream twice
sensations become wooded paths
I walk down again, and again
they fool me
become lost in the aroma
shared from a chipped porcelain cup
sitting on the counter
sipped between two counselors
who found one another
between what was and
what might have been

The Milk Of Paradise

Buchanan opened the door and stepped into the garage, cradling a styrofoam cup of black coffee in his left hand. Macy was fiddling with the mics on his drum set while Andy tuned his bass. They both looked up when he walked in.

"Have you written anything?" Andy demanded, his eyes peering inquisitively at Buchanan through thick locks of dull blonde hair.

Buchanan took a deep breath. "I'm doing well, although my pinkie's a little sore. That means it might rain later on. I slept well. Yeah. Things are generally good. Thanks for asking- you're always so kind. How about yourself?" Buchanan lowered himself down on a bean bag in the corner and took a cautious sip of coffee.

Andy sniffed and turned back to his tuning. "Seriously man, we've got to do this in a month. It has to be perfect. You know that. This is what we're doin', right? We're goin' for it, right? I mean, I quit a good job - and you did too. We've got to..."

"Stop putting pressure on the guy who writes the songs so he can have some room to breathe! Then he won't go crazy from the shrill nagging sounds that always seem to be buzzing in his ears whenever he's around his band. Is that what you were gonna say, Andy?"

"Yeah. Somethin' like that."

Andy resumed tuning his bass, filling the small, dark room with low rumblings. Macy remained silent and tapped the hi-hat with nervous boredom. Buchanan set his coffee down on the floor and lunged up to stretch and yawn before walking to his guitar.

"Where's Hob?"

Andy bent over his amp in mock concentration. Buchanan looked at Macy. "Where's Hob?" he repeated.

"He said he couldn't make it today." Macy said, glancing at Andy.

"Why not?"

"He just said he couldn't."

"How are we supposed to practice without a rhythm guitar?" Macy shrugged.

Buchanan ran a caffeinated hand through his shaggy hair and wandered out of the garage. Things just kept getting more and more frustrating. The band had started out great. They'd all met in response to an ad Buchanan threw up around various places in Moonesville almost six years ago. Andy, Macy and Hob were the only ones that responded to the ad, but they were the only ones who needed to. Everything just seemed to fit from the beginning. They had a lot of fun times whenever they got together, but they were serious enough to keep improving every time they practiced.

Eventually, Andy's cousin's friend set them up to play at some rundown bar across town. Buchanan remembered how nervous they all were that night. He'd only written four songs by that point, and they only knew how to play three covers. But they plowed through the same seven song set eight times, improving a little each time. The few people that filtered in eventually became too drunk to notice or care. The guys were so excited after the first show they decided to start taking themselves more seriously. They practiced almost every day after they got off work, sometimes late into the night. As they played around town more and more, they eventually built up a following that went with them once they started playing in different cities all over Wyoming. People started asking for CDs after their shows, and they decided to cut a demo. The guys at the studio told the band that they sounded great after they finished recording. Things were looking good. So good that Andy announced that he was quitting his job at Geico to play with the band full time.

Buchanan's songs were starting to sound almost professional, and Andy said that they could make it if they tried. He talked Buchanan out of his job at Circuit City, then convinced Macy to stop working at the local shoe factory. Hob, however, held on to his marketing job. His fiancé's dad had gotten it for him after high school, and it was probably the best chance he had of ever making any money. His dissent from the group in that respect triggered a spark of tension that all of them felt, but never admitted.

Buchanan stood outside the garage for awhile, listening to Andy and Macy warm up. Lost in thought, he wandered down the street for a block, absently admiring the well-manicured lawns. He could feel his pulse pounding in his head. Too much pressure. Okay. Good air in. Bad air out. Good. Now. Let's calm down. He

pulled out his cellphone and dialed Hob's number. He got the machine.

"Hey Hob. We're gonna practice for awhile at my place and then grab some lunch. If you can't make it to practice, try to come by and grab a bite to eat with us at Charley's around twelvish. Later, man."

Buchanan turned around and walked back to the garage. Andy and Macy were leaning against the wall smoking and talking when he went in.

"I left Hob a message."

"Good." Andy said without glancing up.

"So what'd you guys think we should do?" Buchanan asked.

Andy looked at Buchanan, then threw his cigarette down on the concrete floor. "Well, first, I'd like to know if you've worked it out yet."

Buchanan watched the tendrils of smoke from the discarded cigarette for a while before answering. "You mean my dry spell?"

Andy nodded.

Buchanan shook his head and walked over to his forgotten coffee. Cold.

Andy followed him across the room persistently. "This isn't good, man. The songs you got, I mean, the songs we've got are great, but they're not gonna make us stand out. There's gonna be fifteen, maybe twenty bands at the showcase this month. The label execs are just gonna be interested in one or two, if that. We've got to do something to get us noticed. We've got to be great. This is our chance, man."

"It's hard to be great on demand," Buchanan said gloomily as he gulped down the cold coffee with a grimace.

Andy moved to get in front of Buchanan. "Yeah, but that's what you do. Why do you think we joined up with you in the first place? You've got it in you, man. You just have to get it out. That's why I think you should give this a shot." Andy handed Buchanan a slip of torn paper:

Writers, Musicians, Artists - Lend Us Your Ears!
Do you suffer from writer's block every time you sit down to write? Do you have a hit song bouncing around in your head, begging to get out? Well, stop suffering in frustration and take advantage of a

limited trial offer of the miracle pill that will change your life. Xanadex™ is a non-prescription drug that naturally releases your full creative potential! To receive your free sample, simply write to:

The Xanadex Corporation
P.O. Box 3523
Mount Abora, NV 43890
or call toll free:
1-800-798-8968

"Oh, this is great," Buchanan chuckled.

"What?" Andy asked.

Buchanan looked up in disbelief. "You're actually serious, aren't you?"

"Yeah, why not? It's not like we've got anything to lose at this point. We've got to play in a month. A month! D'you know how soon that is? And we still don't have the songs we need to get noticed." Buchanan began to pace back and forth around the scattered amps and cords filling the small garage while Andy followed him, lividly lashing his tirade against Buchanan's back. "I want to do this! This is our lives, right here. We're depending on you to do your part. We've depended on you all the way. You've got to do whatever it takes for the band. This isn't about you anymore."

Buchanan spun around and interrupted, "Hey, you worry about you, and I'll worry about me, okay? Your bass line could definitely be tighter. How often to you practice when I'm not around? Maybe my songs aren't as good as they could be because you're not as good as you could be. Maybe you're pulling me down. Maybe you're the reason I haven't written a decent song in seven months."

Andy stood absolutely still for a second. Then, without a word, he walked over to the door and grabbed his coat before walking out.

Buchanan looked at Macy. "Where does he think he's going?" Macy just shook his head sadly, and walked out after Andy. Buchanan watched the door close behind the two, then slumped back into the beanbag chair. He noticed he was still holding the torn ad that Andy gave him, and he quickly read over it again.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered to himself as he dialed the number.

The Xanadex arrived the next day. Buchanan made sure it was shipped overnight. It came in a small white bottle with a dark blue label. In white print on the backside of the label it simply read: *Directions: Take one Xanadex™ capsule before bed each night. Guaranteed results.*

Then below this, in fine print, Buchanan saw: *Warning: Use of Xanadex™ may include several severe side effects, including headaches, insomnia, loss of appetite, a decrease in sensory perception, and liver damage. Consult your physician before taking Xanadex™. Do not use Xanadex™ if you are pregnant or nursing.*

"This is ridiculous," Buchanan said again as he called Andy. After three rings, Andy answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey Andy. This is Buchanan. What's up?"

"Not much," Andy responded tersely.

"Well, hey, I was just callin' to let you know I ordered those pills. From that ad you gave me. They came in today."

Andy grudgingly perked up. "Oh really? Well, that's cool. Do they work?"

"I dunno yet. I'm supposed to take one before I go to bed. So I guess we'll see. D'you wanna come over and practice today or anything?"

"Um. Yeah. Sure. What time?"

"I'm trying to get everyone together around seven tonight at my place. Hopefully Hob'll show up too. I think he's a little upset that we stood him up at Charley's yesterday, though."

"I didn't stand him up. I didn't even know I was supposed to meet him."

"Well, okay. He's a little upset that I stood him up. But yeah. He should be there. Can you call Macy for me? I've got to run to the store and stuff before tonight."

"Yeah. I can call him. We might get there a little early."

"Okay, that's fine. I'll see you later then."

"Later."

Buchanan listened to the phone click, then stared at the floor for awhile, absently watching his toes wiggle while his overwrought brain took a well-deserved break from thinking.

Everyone showed up to practice that night, and every night for the rest of the week. Things went well. They ran through all their songs, picking out problem spots and working on their

overall sound. But throughout the practices, Buchanan could feel an air of expectancy from his bandmates. They were just going through the motions, knowing that they weren't good enough without that one spectacular song to enhance their performance. At least they weren't fighting, Buchanan thought. I hope these stupid pills actually do something.

Everyone left around midnight, promising to get together the next day. Buchanan walked from his garage to his house and plopped down in front of the TV. As Letterman droned on about nothing in particular, Buchanan's tired chin began to be drawn almost magnetically to his chest. He lifted his head with a start, and looked at the bottle of Xanadex sitting on the coffee table. With a small sigh, he popped one his is mouth, doused it down with some water, and stumbled off to bed.

Buchanan woke up sitting next to a tree. A palm tree. He was confused, but didn't complain, since there was a nice breeze and he could see the beach from where he was sitting. There didn't seem to be anyone else around, and all he could hear were what he could only describe as tropical sounds. He'd never been anywhere tropical before, but this is what he imagined it would sound like. His eyes began to close in relaxation just as he heard a small scurrying sound. He opened his eyes, but didn't see anything. He was about to get his eyelids all the way down again when he felt something touch his foot. His eyes sprang open in alarm in time to see a small lizard scurry up his leg and stop on his knee. Ah, just a small tropical lizard, thought Buchanan in relief. Hello small tropical lizard. He examined the lizard without moving. It was bright red on its back, and dark green on its sides. It was kinda cute, in a lizardy way. A bunch of lizards is a lounge — Buchanan remembered reading that somewhere. Then they rushed him.

There must've been at least 500 lizards, all covering him with their sticky foot pads and lashing tails. They went for his eyes first. He didn't remember reading that anywhere. After they emptied his eye sockets they centered on his chest, rummaging through his organs like his ribcage was some overfilled junk drawer. Eventually there was nothing left of him but his skeleton, which they consumed as well. After Buchanan was completely gone, they ran en masse to the beach and spread themselves out to sun. Buchanan was now floating in the sky directly above them, and

watched incredulously as they began to merge with each other, getting flatter and flatter like parchment. As Buchanan rose higher he could see they formed three distinct "sheets" on the beach, each one with different musical notation on it. He gathered that this was important, and struggled to memorize the music on the lizard sheets before he got too high. But soon he lost sight of the beach as he floated higher and higher towards a blinding sun.

The sun in his eyes woke him up in time to turn his alarm clock off before it came on. He curled back up under the sheets and tried desperately to remember the music he saw before the haze of sleep left him altogether, but it was no use. Still, it had to be the pills. There was a song inside him, aching to get out. Or maybe he was so stressed out about the upcoming band showcase that music was all his brain could think about. At any rate, he should tell the other guys in the band about his dream. It might make them a little bit more optimistic at least.

He called them all up after he crawled out of bed, and they eventually decided to practice at Hob's house before lunch, since Hob had the day off. On his way to Hob's house, Buchanan noticed that his radio volume was turned up louder than he usually listened to it, but it sounded fine. I must still have some water in my ears from swimming last week, Buchanan thought. After practice, the guys went out to the Crescendo diner, which was close to Hob's house, but Buchanan didn't really feel like eating anything. He was anxious for the day to be over so he could take another pill and see what his dreams would bring him. Time was running out for the band, and he felt that it would be his fault if they didn't succeed.

Getting home that night, Buchanan grabbed the bottle of Xanadex as soon as he could. He quickly took one, then crawled into bed, even though it was only 9:30. He fell asleep fast, however - for some reason the traffic wasn't as loud that night.

He woke up in some damp basement this time. He was tied to a chair under a single, naked light bulb. He felt like he'd been trampled by a rabid mob, and he saw blood on his clothes with the one eye that still worked. There were various, indefinite shapes in each corner of the basement. Eventually his eyes adjusted to the bad light, and he saw he was surrounded by guitars. He immediately knew they were evil.

"You'll rue the day, you six-stringed fiends!" he yelled at them in the dark. He would've shaken his fist at them to enhance this sentiment if his hands weren't tied down. Soon they began to advance upon him, sliding closer and closer to his chair, but still keeping out of the light. Then, he noticed that the guitars weren't moving themselves — the rats were moving them. Each rat was at least a foot long and six inches high. He noticed that most of them had bulging muscles, and he thought he saw a tattoo on one of them. They were all carrying an electric guitar on their backs, and they seemed to be organizing them around Buchanan for some reason.

Then he heard the unmistakable click and thump of an old Peavey amp being turned on. Then another, and another. Suddenly the room lit up with pyrotechnics, and all the rats hit the same power chord in a surrealistic display of hard-core rat rock n' roll. The rats continued to play, running up and down their fretboards to find the chords for the perfect song that Buchanan was hearing. I've got to remember this song, he thought to himself while his head bobbed uncontrollably to the music. But soon he began to cry out as the music soared louder and louder. He felt like his eardrums were bleeding inside of his head, and the music continued to get even louder and faster. Soon the room was spinning, and he felt his chair tip over into a sea of guitars and rats.

He woke up with a gasp and slapped his alarm clock. It'd been going off for at least ten minutes, but it wasn't loud enough to wake him up. He lay in bed panting for awhile, still shaken up. He tried to remember some of the rat song so he could write it down, but he couldn't remember a single chord that they'd played. And he only had one more week before the showcase. He took a deep breath, then rolled over and fell back asleep.

The band met up a few days later to practice again, in an attempt to get the songs they did have perfect. Buchanan told them about his latest dream when he arrived, and promised that he would do his best to remember the song that came to him that night, if it came at all. Andy seemed skeptical, but understanding. Macy and Hob seemed like they just didn't care anymore. Buchanan was inwardly glad that he only had to take the pills for one more week. These dreams were starting to freak him out quite a bit more than he let on to his bandmates. They warmed up for awhile, then start-

ed to play one of their better songs. They were about a minute into it when Andy stopped playing his bass and started yelling, "Hold up, whoa! HEY!"

Macy and Hob stopped after hearing him, but Buchanan kept right on playing. Andy walked over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. Buchanan turned around with a start, his guitar trailing off into a screech of feedback. "What?" Buchanan asked, annoyed.

"Are you tryin' to kill us here, man?! Jeez, that's loud." Andy walked over to Buchanan's amp. "No wonder! You've got it turned all the way up!" Andy adjusted the volume knob, and walked back to his place. "Okay, here we go. One, two, three four..."

The band started up again, and Buchanan realized with horror that he could barely hear them. He didn't want to upset the band any further, however, so he played along the best that he could - more by memory than hearing. After practice, Buchanan helped the guys load up their van to go to a small club the next day - they were hoping to practice a couple of times in front of a live audience to sharpen their performance skills. Buchanan tried to keep the mood positive, but he was worried over what to do. He was sure the pills were causing him to go deaf, and he was afraid if he continued to take them he would completely lose his hearing. But he'd already come this far, and he was positive that he could remember the next dream song.

After he got home, he grabbed the bottle of Xanadex, and stared at it for a long time while he gave himself an internal talking to. Music is my life, he thought with a bit of remorse. It's all I've ever really had. If I lose my hearing, I don't know what I'll do. Or what I'll become. Buchanan began pacing back and forth, still holding the bottle. On the other hand, he thought, what's the use of being a musician no one wants to listen to? If I'm not a success, then my music is worthless to everyone, including me. I have to do this. He nodded in an attempt to convince himself that he was convinced. He opened the bottle and dumped the small green pill into his hand. He paused momentarily, then shrugged and popped the pill into his mouth before wandering towards his bed.

Buchanan woke up in a fishbowl. He was not a fish, the best he could tell, but he wasn't quite himself. Perhaps he was

somewhere between himself and a fish, but it didn't really matter. All that mattered was the beautiful, ethereal music that he was literally saturated in. He looked around the bowl for the source of the music, his vision blurred by water. Eventually he gave up, and determined that the water was the music, and he was content to soak in it for awhile. As he floated around the fishbowl, he became so mesmerized and soothed by the music that he floated to the top and rolled over on his back. He hadn't ever been this relaxed. It was nice to enjoy music in its purest form for once. To not worry about record labels and contracts and concerts. Here, in this fishbowl sanctuary, Buchanan thought that this is the way it should be. He realized that he'd been killing himself for recognition, when all he needed to do was live for the music. He vaguely heard another sound penetrate through the music water, but he was far too comfortable to care.

"Mom! Buchanan's dead!" the little boy yelled.

"Are you sure? Where is he?" his mom answered from another room.

"He's floatin' on top. He's been that way for awhile. I been watchin' him."

His mom walked into the room. "Eugh. You're right, he's dead honey. We'll get you a new fish tomorrow, okay?"

The kid shrugged, and reached behind the fishbowl to grab a small green net. "What do we do with him?"

"Well, how about we give him a trash can burial?"

"Okay."

Buchanan screamed a scream no one could hear as he was lifted free of the water and thrown outside into an empty trash can. It was dark and he couldn't breathe, but that didn't concern him. All that mattered was that he didn't hear the music anymore. He flopped desperately around inside the trash can for awhile, then gave up, convinced it was useless and he'd never hear those sweet sounds again. Then suddenly, from far off, he heard them. He flopped around some more with all the strength he had left, and eventually landed in a small pool of water that had collected in the trash can. It wasn't enough to cover him, but it was enough to listen to. He shuddered a sigh of relief as his fishy breath got slower and slower before vanishing completely.

Buchanan gently opened his eyes. Well. That wasn't a bad dream at all, he thought. Not as bad as the last ones. And that music

- wow. It sounded like... wait. He remembered exactly what it sounded like! He scrambled out of bed as fast as he could and grabbed his acoustic guitar. He began throwing things around the room in a desperate hunt for a pick. Finally finding one, Buchanan sat down on the edge of the bed with his guitar, listening to the music still reverberating in his head. This was great. All he had to do was figure the song out and then teach it to the guys before the competition. Andy could come up with some quick lyrics, he was sure. With this kind of song in their repertoire, they couldn't help but be noticed. Now to figure it out. The first chord might be an E. Buchanan strummed an E on his guitar.

Nothing happened.

He strummed harder.

Still nothing.

He bent his head down against the guitar and began to beat on the soundless strings until his pick broke. Then he went crazy. He spun his guitar wildly around the room, smashing everything he could with it while the music in his head played on, infuriating him even more. In his haze of destruction he had a single stark vision of Beethoven clutching a stick between his teeth, eyes filled with tears of frustration.

Amongst the crashing and thrashing in his room, Buchanan's answering machine caught a call from Andy. "Hey, this is Andy. You should be up by now. We've got to leave for the club in about half an hour. Did you remember your dream song this time? We might still have time to learn it this week. So hurry up and call me back, okay? I should be..."

The voice cut off as one of Buchanan's random blows demolished the answering machine. His guitar smashed beyond recognition, Buchanan collapsed exhausted on his bed, gently sobbing as the music played on. It was so beautiful.

Resolution

The surge and clatter of swirl-white conceals
how shallow underneath is, how quickly gone.
Leave that noise behind. Come here
where the water is slow, and clear.
Watch the crawfish prance across the sand,
the mica flash, the sculpen blend with stone.
It's all beyond your reach though it appears
near and known as your outstretched hand.

Winter Scene

They killed the cow, ate their fill
in front of her, used the rest
to foul the well, then set free
hogs from their pen, burned the barn
to send smoke-signals to men
concealed close by, let them see
cost of choosing blue, not gray,
and because they believed one
her infant's father, bound her
to a cherry tree, let snow's
brisk fall pallet and swaddle,
soften child-whimpers until
she had told all they wanted,
ensured her soon widowhood,
and kin swore ever after
no cherry fell from that tree
that wasn't hard and bitter.

Bev

You're wearing that smirk on your face again, Bev. I would have thought the make-up artists would have fixed your mug up a little better for your last showing and all. I always hated when you curved your lips up into that devious expression—like you had one up on the rest of the world. But now I guess you really do.

You looked a little like this the day me and Doris got married—except your eyes were opened then—but just barely. Though your mouth turned upward, your eyes squinted in wary disapproval. Who was I to be marrying your daughter? Who was I to be standing in your living room holding your baby's hands and repeating words to her that I had no clue what they meant?

Well, maybe you were right. Maybe I didn't know what I was doing. Maybe I did just want to get Doris in bed. But I think I proved myself all right. I stayed with her, didn't I? That's better than Max did to you, at least. And I loved her. I really did. Didn't I prove that to you, Bev?! Didn't I prove to you my love?!

Open your eyes, woman! Open your eyes and just give me a wary squint one more time. I promise if you look hard you'll see I wasn't so bad after all. Why can't you just look at me now?

But I guess that's the way you always were. You were so stubborn, Bev Carpenter, that you could make a mule buck up out of impatience. Yep—you always did get your way. So you won't be opening your eyes for me today.

There was a time when you lighted up on the stubbornness, the harshness, the downright hatefulness for a while. Things began to slowly change when you started going crazy. Or at least that's what we thought it was at first. You saw children hidden in the branches of the giant oak in your front yard. There were escaping the workers at Goody's department store. You had seen a sign at the front of the store: "Blowout Kid's Sale." The men at Goody's wanted to take these kids, blow them out of your trees, and sell them to the Communists as slaves. You wanted to save the

children, didn't you? But you couldn't. If the men saw you, they'd sell you, too. And you knew they were watching you. They had cameras set up behind the plants in your living room, the stove in your kitchen, and the bookshelf in your study. They knew your every move. And sometimes you thought Max sent them there—to see how life was making out for you, without HIM. After twenty-three years of marriage, Max had cheated on you and skipped town in the mid-70s. Though no one else ever saw him again, you swore he'd come back to visit sometimes. He'd sit in the front seat of your old, broken down station wagon, which still sat idle in your back yard. Max still had the key—twenty-three years late, he still had the key to your car.

To get your mind off of Max, the children, and the Communists at Goody's, I started coming by and taking you to Hardee's for coffee and biscuits every morning. Do you remember that, Bev? Huh? Do you remember? Three years ago, after an accident at the trucking company I worked for, I got put on disability, so I was home all day by myself. I was home alone, and you were home alone. So it only made sense that I be the one to give you a little company. After all, I needed some myself. The children hadn't invaded my front yard, but it seemed you needed some relief from the ones who had come into yours. I'd come pick you up every morning around seven, and you were always running around looking for your keys, your hat, your purse. I didn't think much of it. Your house had always been piled high with old magazines and junk. And I was surprised you hadn't lost anything before. But I never thought you would lose your mind. It wasn't until a few months later that I really began to think something might be wrong. Our coffee/biscuit mornings had become so routine that I would usually let myself in and wait in the living room while you finished getting dressed upstairs. One morning you were taking longer than usual, so I started to worry. Now it seems like yesterday.

"Bev! Bev! What's taking you so long?!" I grabbed onto the wooden railing and yelled up the stairwell.

"I'm comin', Barry! Hold your horses—I can't find my shoes! My black heels—have you seen em'?!" I knew where your shoes were. I had stumbled over those stupid high heels as I made my way from the front door to the couch. They had been sitting in front of the coffee table, so I had moved them underneath it.

"Your shoes are down here, Bev! Hurry up—I'd like a FRESH biscuit, ya know?!" A few seconds later you started strolling down the steps, wearing a red blazer—and nothing else.

"Bev?! What ARE you doing?!" I covered my eyes with my fingers, turned my head, and started making my way toward the next room. "Go put some clothes on, Bev!"

"I have my red blazer on!"

By this time I was yelling to you from the kitchen. Sure fifty-five-year-old men still enjoy looking at naked women, but not if that naked woman is his seventy-five-year-old mother-in-law. But you didn't think about that, did you? Seeing you naked for those brief seconds shot bullets of disgust down to the bottom of my gut. I sure hoped Doris wouldn't wrinkle so much in the next twenty years.

"Bev, you need to put clothes on UNDERNEATH your blazer! You can start out with a bra and pair of bloomers."

But you didn't understand. And at that point I didn't understand what was happening either. You had never behaved like this before. You were a modest woman. It wasn't like you were coming on to me. Shoot, you had hated me most of the twenty-five years you had known me. But you weren't embarrassed. As I peaked around the corner (I had waited over ten minutes with no comments from you), you simply sat stationed in your rocking chair—feet crossed properly at the ankles (you had fastened on those black heels), glasses resting on your nose, and a magazine unfolded on your lap. You were reading Country Living and waiting for me, it seemed, as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Seeing you sitting there sent a sharp pang up my back—kinda like the shooting sensation I had received when I pulled those muscles lifting at the trucking company the day I got put out of work.

"Bev, I'm—uh—I'm calling Doris to see if she wants to stop by here on her way to work."

"All right. Whatever, Barry. I'm just readin' up on what's the best way to make pumpkin pies from scratch."

Your nakedness numbed me, but you simply rocked in your chair—unfazed. With shaky hands, I picked up the phone and hurriedly dialed Doris' cell phone number, hoping I would catch her on her way into work.

"Doris, I need you to get over here right away and help me with your mother."

"What? Barry, I gotta get to work. What do you need me to help with? Does Mama not want to go to Hardee's this morning?"

"Doris, your mother's just acting strange…" I didn't want to tell her over the phone that you were sitting in your living room buck naked.

"What's the problem, Barry? Why is it so important that you can't handle it?"

"Doris, when I came to pick up your mother this morning, she wasn't wearing any clothes."

"WHAT?!"

"And when I asked her to put some on, she didn't respond. It's like she thinks I'm crazy. Right now she's just sitting in the living room waiting to go…"

"Is she still…"

"Yeah—she doesn't have any clothes on."

You always did know how to shock us. But I guess it wasn't really you doing the shocking after all. At least you're not naked, now. Yeah—that purple dress actually looks nice on you. I wonder if you're wearing those heels. I can't see them, but I bet you are. Are you wearing your favorite black heels, Bev? Are you?! You better have not left them lying on the floor again. Don't let me trip over those shoes one more time. Where are they, Bev?! Are you wearing them? Are you?!

You always did screw things up. Doris is crying again, and it's all because of you. I guess I should be sitting there beside her on the pew. You always knew how to make her cry, Bev. You know that? I can't make her stop—not this time. Why is it that the people we love the most make us hurt the worst? Why is that, Bev? Make her stop crying. Make her stop! You were the only one who ever really could.

Doris cried all the time when we had to put you in the home. Did you know that, Bev? She cried because she hated seeing her mother so childlike and helpless. But mostly, I think she cried because she thought she was a bad daughter. Doris made our money in the office every day, so I was the one who would go to the home and sit with you. It wasn't that bad, really. We'd play bingo and checkers and sometimes Go Fish. Somehow, I thought you started liking me. When you forgot Doris' name, she became "The Woman." Who did I become? "The Friend." And on good days, I was the "Best Friend."

The first time you called me your best friend was when I snuck a bag of Hershey kisses into your room. The doctors wouldn't allow you to eat anything that might aggravate your diabetes. But you always craved Hershey's kisses, and I couldn't watch you suffer any more. The small bag of chocolate morsels couldn't hurt too much, could they? You were so happy the first time I brought them.

"Whatcha got there, friend?" You wrinkled your nose and forehead into a perplexed expression. For a second I thought you could smell them. You always had your eyes, nose, and—especially—mouth open for chocolate.

"A surprise."

"What kinda surprise you can't show an old lady, right now?!"

"All right, all right, Bev!" Your agitation wasn't abnormal—you never really were patient. I lifted the knit blanket covering the bag of kisses and dropped the whole thing into your hands.

"Kisses! Kisses!" You tore into the bag of candy like it was a pot of gold in the middle of the Great Depression.

"You like what I got you there, Bev?" Never in my lifetime would I have expected what happened next.

"Kisses—kisses for you, friend. Kisses for my BEST friend." And you reached up and plopped a big one on my cheek. I bet you don't remember that. You were not what I'd call an affectionate person, even with those you loved. I had only seen you kiss one other person for as long as I had known you—and that person was dead when you did it. At your mother's funeral, I saw you reach down into the casket, pick up your mother's cold, heavy arm, hold it to your face, and kiss it.

You won't be kissing anyone today. Not even if I give you a bag of chocolates—Hershey kisses, even. I thought about bringing some—just in case. Would you have kissed me, Bev? Would you have opened your eyes, sat right up, and kissed me one more time?

Spending so much time with you and hearing you call me your best friend made me want to be that person to you. I had no one else to be best friends with. Doris worked all time, the kids were gone, and the grandkids didn't live close enough to visit their

old grandpop every day. So I would visit you. On good days, they let me take you out. We still even made it to Hardee's for coffee and biscuits about once a week. I was always your best friend on those days.

So I thought everything was okay. Despite twenty-five years of mostly quarrels, you and me could tolerate—maybe even enjoy each other, after all. But last night was different, and that's why today seems so strange. That's why I just wish you would open your eyes to me, and let me see that everything's okay. If you would just open your eyes and get up, we could go to Hardee's and get a biscuit, play Go Fish, and stuff ourselves with Hershey kisses. But you won't. Stubborn old lady. You won't.

The other night the home called and said you had fallen. You had been holding your head and screaming all day, and when they tried to subdue you, you kicked and yelled and slid out of your chair to the floor.

"Mr. Moody, Bev—uh—Bev isn't doing so good."

My anger mounted as I answered the good-for-nothing nursing home worker. Insensitive witch. "What do you mean? You told us yesterday she had at least three more years. Yeah, she doesn't remember her own daughter from the nurse in the next room, but that's just in her head. You said she was okay—healthy, even. We've been feeding her well...enough. She's been all right. She's all right, right? Right?!"

"Mr. Moody, you and your wife better come quick. All I'm sayin' is you better get here if you want to tell your mother-in-law goodbye."

And so we went. I woke Doris up and told her it was time. I bit my lip when she started sobbing. When we entered your room and saw you in the bed, I balled my hands into two tight fists. I watched Doris go to you, pick up your still warm arm, and kiss it—over and over again. You were still conscious, but you didn't say anything. They had all these tubes stuck in you every which-a-way, and you just squinted over at me—inspecting me like you had never seen me before.

"What the heck YOU doing here?"

My heart jerked. You spoke with such harshness, you would have thought Doris and I were standing at the alter in your living room all over again.

"I—uh—I came to see ya, Bev. I…I came to say goodbye, I guess."

"Get out! Get out you bastard, and let me see The Woman without your ugly face staring at me like that."

Why did it hurt? Why, after all these years, did your words seem even more painful now? I hated you, didn't I? Hadn't I always? It was as if you had sliced open an old scar with your words. I hesitated before speaking—or doing anything.

"GET OUT!" You gritted your teeth and raised your scrawny finger with as much mobility as the twisted cords that consumed your frail body would allow you. The doctor grabbed hold of my arm and ushered me out of the room.

"She obviously doesn't want you in there."

"I've spent every day with her for the past three years."

"Come on, Barry. You know this is normal. She doesn't even remember hour-to-hour anymore, much less day-to-day."

So, in the end, you closed yourself off to me again. And now they are closing you off to me forever. Who will I argue with now, Bev? Who will I take to Hardee's every morning and sneak Hershey's kisses to in the afternoons? Who will be my best friend, Bev? Huh? Did you ever think of that? Did you ever think that you were the only one that I had, too? That me and you—we were all alone together? How can you leave me like this? Do you remember me now, Bev? Do you remember me now?

Cemetery

After the wave of pain
rushes through your veins
and out your heavy hands
it is replaced by a feeling
more formal than
black suits and ties
or eulogies in cold blue skies
dirt a stiff as your heart's
stubborn beat that questions
each day since century's last week

Walking down
the stillness of the ground
and the air, the road skirting around
the bare-limbed hills
disregards the line of cars
or the growing field of granite stones
rows of mossy weathered scars

Time leads us by
the still hours when we remember
as frozen plastic flowers
become faded, outlived
recollect nothing of the sun's glow
but only the visiting chill
of those who won't let go

Love and Less

Somewhere between Rolling Rocks
and morning light,
between neck and collarbone,
piecemeal tokens of
flowering purple affection,
touched lightly with a morning buzz
and your limp arm over
my wrinkled consciousness.

Somewhere between Sunday morning
and sausage biscuits,
the cashier at Hardee's
with a careful glance,
feigning apathetic eyes
over the rim of her thick glasses,
hands us our tray,
gives away what she really thinks
of missing buttons
and my lipstick collar,
concealing gleanings
of that glaucous night before.

We sit, wondering and knowing
in a window booth,
silently chewing the sobering direction.
Clarity advances
with each church-bell chime
from First Baptist down the street,
like a grandfather clock,
and our seconds together compete
against throbbing temples and
an almost soothing indifference,

telling us our time has been eaten
to tabletop crumbs.

I left you my phone number
and you left me no choice
but to leave you, back turned,
at the steps to your apartment.
Neither one of us knew
where it would go, or end,
from free beer and an invitation.
After a week of turning away,
my memories turn a lighter hue
in compliment with the
blood-shade bruises in the mirror.
You fade to pallid skin in my mind.

Sonnet for Reality

Drifting too far down the lysergic stream
My paddle had fractured a mile from shore.
Wandering through this mind-altering dream
I peeked inside Blake's perceptual door.

Reality cleansed or drug-induced lie,
Have I the courage to explore this world?
A taste of Nirvana waiting inside
With all of life's secrets neatly unfurled.

Yet I stood and pondered what it all meant.
Embraced by an old familiar tune
Swept up in illusion's rapid ascent
My door to perception closed much too soon.

Life's not proactive, the vision revealed,
We're just reacting and nothing is real.

My Life Is Prose

i assume what they assume about me.
they are assuming the chances i will spend this money on something other than a bus ticket, or that my freedom is not worth while
i sit here anyway
the sidewalk is rough and clean like a scrubbed pumice stone
with little pebbles trapped in its grainy chalk-white
people are the traffic jam on friday afternoons
traveling from little shops of indigenous artistic pieces
they don't care about any cultural significance
just the mood that it will add to their house
my friends think its funny that i ask for money
but i don't like to work
there's something about holding a job that suffocates me
everyone does, and they aren't any happier than me really
some are. some are more depressed. it all evens out
the last time i worked was the last time i ever will
it started out okay
a salary above minimum wage
five days a week
weekends too, when i wanted
but there was something about the boss
my boss at the ice cream shop checked once a week
to make sure i could still manage the lever that releases the smoothies
all the rest treated me like a grown up mal-intentioned 8 year old
i liked that and hated it all at the same time
i resented it
but then i could cut corners and not feel guilty
because all bosses are dicks anyway
the restaurant, with my new job, had atmosphere
it was small enough to always seem packed
the manager said he liked the looks of me
and if i started low, i could work higher

when i first started working in the swampy dish room
the humidity rose like a steamy jungle,
settled and rolled down my arms and back
my hands were so wrinkled and swollen
i never wanted to see water again
then i started waiting tables
then i started working the bar
the tips rolled in as the drinks disappeared
the young girls made the regulars feel younger
their clothing said look
but their aggressively guarded language said don't touch
at least not too much
i rarely carded anyone
except once in a while
when you go out on a friday night
it feels good to get away with something
not knowing for sure if i cared or not
made the almost-women learn their best tricks
their gaze held mine a little longer
the line between their breasts slid a little deeper
as they leaned against the waist-high counter
and ordered whatever beer they saw everyone else drinking
they'd sip on it the whole night
or until half-a-man with enough looks offered to buy them another
they kept casual intent on their watches and
left to sneak back in the house and
doze in church the next day
letting the stale smell of cigarettes waft to the ceiling with the sermon
or spend the night with the girl whose mom never asked questions
no matter how late they slept
my boss caught me serving a girl once
she was under the legal age
but moved with the purpose of one ten years over
i turned to face boss by leaning an elbow against the bar
next to the rag beside a forgotten spill
"ya makin' enough money here?"
he seemed to be looking at me and past me at the same time
"eh, could always use a little more" i replied
wondering but not really caring if i would get a warning or lose
my job

"how about earning some more?"
i knew he didn't mean at the bar
i agreed without asking
i'll never know why
the next day i was pushing small bags of white powder
that sold illegally well
i took as much as i wanted when boss wasn't looking
then i quit, or maybe i was told to leave
i can't remember which
i never made it to work on time
but at least i was always decent to the customers
i still don't know what i really want to do
i've come up with a lot of great ideas
years ago i was going to become a photographer
maybe move out west and try some communal living
maybe get back to my roots and know the beauty of these little
mountains more deeply as i try to see it for other people
the greens, the rivers, the tumbled rocks of nature's time
maybe i could be a writer
i've always been a story teller
that's what mama told me before she left
that was a few days before i figured out that meant she died
i was five and she was beautiful
i'd catch a spider and spin a web on how i found it
she'd just smile and let me preach my knowledge
how spiders hate people because they ruin their webs
but they like me because i understand them
i thought i'd like to let him live in my room
she was sure he'd like it better outside, and she'd show me why
i wasn't certain i should show her the spider's secret home
but i trusted her and thought if the spider knew her he would too
in the middle of the web was a frosty tightly woven patch of spider string
mama told me that the spider laid her eggs in there
and that the babies would want to see their mama when they were born
i saw again that sometimes she does know more than me, even if
i was the expert
i let the spider go
right their on the stucco wall so she could crawl back into the web
mama was the only one who ever showed me why

except why she died
other people have died too
but not in the physical
i think that would be easier to deal with if they had
but they died to me
and shriveled up in my heart
leaving a dark dense mass of what used to be
pleasant thoughts and dreams
turn bitter when they can be felt no more.
felicia was the first and ultimately the last
there were others after her
but none of them were allowed in
there are places inside that can only be touched once
and once they have been burned
by careless fingers
they are sealed forever
healing is a miracle that the cliché of time cannot mend
it made me forget for brief intervals
but i guarded that sacred place ferociously
and all around it too when i smelled the singed remains again
so i have been alone since felicia
her hair was streaked, different shades with different seasons
her sense of humor was a little off
she would laugh at things i never saw
but to hear her laugh, that was enough
she knew me
she showed me things
the warmth i knew when i was with her
was familiar, like mama's touch
i was content just to be with her
she touched me in her quiet little way
like when i was sitting in a chair
inside her favorite coffee shop and
she saw me
she squatted down in a balanced crouch
put her chin on my knee, smiled, and asked about my day
how do i still remember that moment?
her eyes were deep
brown that marbled in brightness
and were endless in the dusk

i wanted to brush a straggled strand that rested on her cheek
back to join the rest of her hair
i couldn't quite make my hand reach to her
but she knew it, like she always did about me
she hugged my knees and went to work
and that was years ago
would she still know me now, if she could?
if she hadn't fallen in love?
but that was years ago
i wonder what i'll what i'll eat for dinner tonight
terrace is a great friend, but a terrible room mate
last night he ate my left over chinese
i should just move in with a girl
they're more polite about stuff like that
but he's cutting me a break with rent
until i can hold a job
or until i can get out of here
i guess i should tell him i'm thinking about leaving
he'd just shrug and say take care
but if i left without telling anyone
just saved it up and left
they would have to wonder
remember andrew?
wonder where he went
maybe he died
maybe he left with some girl
i kind of miss him hanging around
i could write terrace 3 months later and tell him i found my crazy
rich uncle who mama mentioned lived in colorado
i'd tell him i found a girl and she's wild about me
she loves me
maybe i'll leave, and just be a legend
and never say anything at all.
i might have to get a job in order to save up for a plane ticket
or maybe i'll just take the bus
i've always heard you meet crazy people that way
it'd take me a while to save up that much
but i have waited this long
i promised myself i would never work again
the government takes a damn nice dollar

a pretty penny
so that bums like me can have some money
so that girls can have abortions
so that we can bomb other countries
and kill their mothers
i know about that kind of stuff
i used to read the paper all the time
when i worked on the other side of town
i don't suppose news changes much
just in location and names
faces and details are never really offered
that's why no one cares
or forgets two weeks later
that's about how long it took my dad to forget his first love
and everyone else too
but I remembered mama
and that it wasn't right to have another woman in the house
she never helped me tie my shoes
or saw how hard it was for me to sound out the letter "s" when i
tried to read out loud
she only talked to me when my dad was around
which was only when he wasn't working
or talking with his secretary
who seemed to be replaced yearly
by someone slimmer and more attentive to his needs in the office
each year i grew a good bit more
doing whatever i wanted
which usually wasn't very much
i'd throw back a few each weekend
with the same people who i saw every day in school
the only verbal bitterness that ever spilled between me
and my father
was when i decided to drop out of community college
after promising i would transfer to a university with more prestige
when i figured out what i wanted to do and who i wanted to be
i guess i couldn't be who i already was
halfway through my third semester
i met terrace through another friend
i've been living with him off and on every since
but that's the kind of thing kids who use bandanas to hold their

matted curly hair off their face do
i went to visit my dad two years ago
he was cordial
i was normal
i drank all my coffee
his remained cold and untouched
and we haven't talked since
he always accused me of being careless and aloof anyway
but quiet people intrigue me more than those who talk a lot
that's why i like myself
i don't talk unless i need to
strangers are the best to talk to
surrounding them is always an aura of many colors
like a prism
red or blue i notice immediately
because it is most like me
yellow and green will intrigue me
because i don't know them very well
here comes a nice-looking girl
maybe she'll give me some money
for a ticket outta here
maybe she'll understand and not assume
a peace sign and a smile, and maybe she'll understand
she smiled and signed back

"hey, can you help a brother out?"

her smile slid from her face but remained in her eyes
her weight shifted as she adjusted her opinions

"how's that?"

"i only need seventy five more cents for a bus ticket. do you have any change you could give me?"

she looked down at the ground, then at her friends.
she scuffed at a black mark on the sidewalk
and looked across the street
at the café that made this my favorite spot to ask for help
green vines reached towards the ground

bright bold flowers stretched out to the sun but were
content to root in the hand-woven baskets and
murmurs and laughter of hippies and moms and kids
who fellowshipped around the common tables of the café
their communion was with each other
she looked back at me
my hair was strung like a wire back from my face
i was wearing the blue shirt that made the color of my eyes
melt out and match the sky
or so a girl told me as we talked yesterday
about how much we like the brick sidewalks
in this cozy city-town
i wondered what this girl would say about the brick
or if she assumes i'll use the money for something else.

"i'll give you seventy five cents for a good story," she said.

i couldn't think of anything to say.



Atonement
watercolor, 9" x 12"



Cezanne's Pots
pastels, 18" x 23"



Eye of Moses
acrylic, 16" x 20"



Couple
watercolor, 13.5" x 10.5"



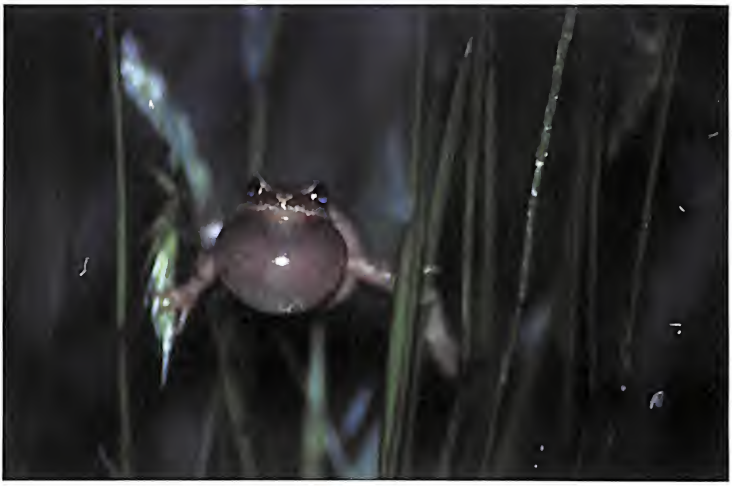
Hummingbird in Flight
4" x 6"



Memorial
8" x 10"



James Haynes' Cars and Grocery
11" x 8"



Frog, Monogahela National Forest
3" x 5"

Painting the Boundary

A squirt bottle of Brush-be-Gone should part the way brown,
and nod your toothed three leaves
that raise and redden my ankle skin.
I'll come back when your oil is not renewed
by sun and green and rain.

I'll find ancient slash marks on dead boundary trees,
refresh the stain of survey
separating no ones land
into yours and mine
and be proud that mine is mine
though I know it's not.
It's all its own, beyond paint and axe.

A Troubled Sky

I wake to an owl screech,
black feathers scattered,
crows caterwauling around the oak,
one mewling for its lost mate.

My call came at three,
a nightmare crashing through,
your body already cool,
the tick of a fan the only hint
air once stirred with your breath.

Day takes over, blazing as it does
in Van Gogh's painting of a wheatfield
where he shot himself, dying later
cradled in his father's arms.

The way I held you.
A landscape I can't scumble over--

like the canvas
lashed with cobalt, ocher, black,
the one road dropped by the horizon,
the sky ominous, embittered by crows.

Rainbow Falls

When you stand on the bridge as we did
breathing the acrid scent of galax and laurel
the day sunny, as it was
spray misting our hair and clothes
you can see a rainbow.

Upstream, swimmers zig-zag
down a rock slope and leap into a pool.
Swim at your own risk, the sign says,
water narrowing between boulders
and surging on to the falls.

Like the roil of days
we dare throw ourselves in, the rush
we crave before pulled out.

No, we don't rope the top,
the ranger explains,
it might encourage more fools,

It was her day off.
Cheerful, a sweet smile, say friends.
She'd do anything for you.

Handed her a limb, the boyfriend sobs,
but she tumbled too fast,
couldn't grab hold.

Clawing the edge, water tearing at her clothes,
rinsing her mouth of screams.

Dreamers

I got a wife, which might surprise you, seeing as how I'm still so young and all. I got a baby too. Well I've got this wife. She looks like Ann-Margret too. But her name is Kim. We live with my moma and my sister Janice. You ought to see this picture of my wife we've got up on top of the TV, Kim making her debut which is something she honest to God did three years ago in Rocky Mount. In the picture, Kim is wearing a long white floor-length fancy dress and pearls and little pearl earrings. She's got lace and flowers and all in her hair. She looks great. She is staring right out of that picture frame and when you look at the picture, it's like her eyes will follow you all over the room. You can sit on the couch or you can sit in the recliner. There is a famous painting like that too. I remember this from art in high school. Anyway when I look at Kim's deb picture in its fancy frame, I like to think that she is looking into the future. That she is looking for me.

She found me about one year later. See, first Kim was a deb and then she went to St. Marys College over here in Raleigh, they have got a lot of debs at St. Marys. Kim's mother and two of her aunts went to St. Marys too, what chance did she have. They make a daisy chain when you graduate from St. Marys, and hand it over to the juniors. I have seen a picture of this, Kim's mother holding up the daisy chain. She is younger in the picture, but she does not look like Ann-Margret. Her collarbones stick out. She looks like a bitch which she is, no wonder Kim's daddy split.

Kim herself did not get to do the chain thing. She got pregnant, and married me.

See, last spring I went over there to St. Marys with Creative Landscaping, I was working two jobs then because Daddy was in the hospital at Dorothea Dix which he has been in and out of for years. He sees things. He hears them too. You can't keep him on his medicine. It is another story. Anyway I had already graduated from Broughton High and I was working these two jobs,

so I went over there to St. Marys College with Creative Landscaping. We had a contract with them. They have these big long rows of bushes going everyplace, and if any one of those bushes started dying, we would come in and take it out and replace it with another one the same size. And we used to change the flowers around the fountain and the sundial and all along there in front of the chapel, whatever was prettiest that was in season, first daffodils then pansies then petunias then gardenias then mums in the fall. Something is always blooming at St. Marys College. Everything is the same size. It looks great. So I liked that job a lot, I like to see things looking good. In fact I got to thinking I might go over to State and get a degree in that. I had thought English, before I got the Creative Landscaping job. I had $1,900 saved up, but then I got married.

I used to have this weird little man teacher at Broughton High named Mr. Burton, he thought I was great in English. When we did Shakespeare, we had to write a sonnet. The end of my sonnet was,

So let me be a candle burning bright
With hope and love against the coming night.

That is a couplet. It knocked him out. He gave me A plus. Then he came over and sat down next to me in the cafeteria at lunch. He had this big salad. He said he was a vegetarian.

"Joe," he said next, "what are your plans for next year?"

"Work, I reckon," I said.

He said he hoped I was considering college. He hoped I had looked into the possibilities for financial aid. But on account of what had happened with Daddy and all, I had dropped out once already. So my grades were not too hot. For a while there I couldn't concentrate. I got plenty of Cs. But then Moma quit drinking and got another job and I came back for senior year.

But I did not want to get into all this with Mr. Burton.

He had a pink shirt on. This buddy of mine, Roger, always said Mr. Burton was gay but I don't think so. "I'll be glad to write you a recommendation anytime, anyplace," Mr. Burton said. He had salad in his teeth. "Do you *want* to go to college?" he asked me. We stood up with our trays.

"It is my dream," I said.

As soon as I said this, I knew it was true. And who knows? I might get there yet. But I've got a family to take care of now. I try to do the right thing.

So this is how I met Kim. It was spring, everything blooming and the right size on the campus at St. Marys College. Azaleas, forsythia, periwinkle, you name it, it was blooming. We were edging the walks. So that day I had to work bent over which made my jeans too tight. I took my wallet and my knife out of my pocket and put them up in the crotch of a tree. Then when I got halfway home I remembered this, so I had to get off the Beltline and turn all the way around and go back. So I was pissed. It was hot, and I was pissed. I went back over there.

Now the grass was full of girls, soaking up the rays. Classes must have been over for the day. Lord, Tits and ass and long, long legs, and all of them winter white. This was just about the first day it was hot enough to lay out, see.

Then I saw her. Oh lord. Kim was laying on her back on her towel, wearing this little bitty pink bikini bathing suit. She had cotton pads over her eyes. She had this aluminum, I guess it was, reflector under her head, so she would get *more* sun. Oh lord. She was all pink and curvy. She looked as good as it gets. I got my knife and my wallet out of the crotch in the tree and put them in my pocket and then I just stood there. I couldn't of moved if you'd paid me. I stood there awhile and then two things happened real fast.

Kim sat up all of a sudden and the cotton pads fell down off her eyes. "What do you think you're looking at?" she said. But she did not act mad. She had a little line of sweat on her upper lip. She looked so good.

At the same time she sat up, this big security guard in a brown shirt and pants started across the grass toward us. "Hey, buddy!" he was hollering. They keep a real close watch on those girls. By then, though, I didn't care if he shot me.

"I'm looking at *you*," I said to Kim.

She crinkled up the corners of her eyes then the way she does and smiled at me, she was ready for adventure, I could tell.

"All right, buddy. The show's over." The security guard had me by the elbow, he was hustling me out of there. I looked back at Kim while he did this.

"Call me," she said.

Well, I did, of course. I was a regular Sherlock Holmes

figuring out who she was and how to do it. I had to sleuth around. But she was my dream girl. I told her so, right off the bat.

"Don't even get in this truck unless you are going to take me seriously," I said the first time I picked her up. I had planned to say this. I had practiced saying it. My truck was the only truck parked along that half-moon driveway in front of the school, where you go to pick up your date. People were looking at it.

She climbed right in. "Where are we going?" she said.

I drove her up to Kerr Lake. We got some beer and some crackers and Vienna sausage and Velveeta cheese at a 7-Eleven on the way up there. We had a picnic. It was the best food I ever ate. On the way back, I played her my new Don Williams tape. It's real romantic. I was in love. By then it was dark out and we rode with the windows down. Kim scooted over and sat real close to me in the truck. She has this way of filling her skin so full of herself that she almost busts out, if you follow me. It's hard to explain. It is a very attractive feature though. Maybe you call it, charisma. I went home and wrote a song about her.

We kept it up. I was over there at the college as much as I could be, whenever I wasn't working. Anytime I could get over there, Kim would go out with me. She could have had her pick and I knew it, boys from State, fraternity guys from Chapel Hill. But Kim wanted me. She wanted me even after her mother started taking a fit which she did soon enough. Her mother really got up on her high horse about it. She told Kim that she couldn't see me anymore, and said I was a day laborer. I couldn't argue with her. I reckon I am one. I did not even try to tell Kim's mother about being in the Art Club or the Honor Council or what Mr. Burton said. Kim's suitemates thought it was all real romantic, they used to cover for her when she would stay out all night. Of course I couldn't take her over to my house because of my little sister Janice, that I felt kind of responsible for. One time we went down to Morehead City and ate at Captain Tony's, right on the dock. Kim was not doing so hot in school by then as you can imagine. Exams were coming up. I reckon she would of flunked out if she hadn't of gotten pregnant, which she did.

"What do *you* want to do?" I asked her this when the EPT showed positive. What I wanted to do was marry her, but I didn't want to force her into anything.

She looked at me. Her brown eyes got big and sparkly. Again I felt that quality I was telling you about, like she might pop

right out of her skin. "I want to have the baby," she said. Kim's dorm room was all full of stuffed animals and Care Bears and rainbow posters, and like that, so I was not surprised.

"Moma will just *die*," she said. Now I knew that was true too. Kim's mom always told her, "Marry a surgeon." Kim hates her mom. Kim's dad left because he just couldn't take it anymore, according to Kim. Her older brother went with him, out to California. Kim's mom had already tried to get her father to write to Kim and tell her to stop dating me, but he would not. Instead he sent her a postcard from Hawaii that said, "Follow your bliss. Love, Dad."

So I was not surprised at the way Kim's mom acted. The only thing that did surprise me was my own family's reaction. My mother is a sweet woman, she was sweet even when she was drinking. Now she's got high sugar and can't. Anyway my mother just smiled and kissed me when I told her, but that night I heard her crying which is embarrassing to hear. The only time I ever heard her do it before was when Gran-Gran died, and the first time Daddy went into Dix. Janice kicked me in the leg when I told her, this surprised the hell out of me. I mean, I practically raised Janice. I guess she is jealous of Kim or something. Still, they came around. And they have been sweet as can be ever since Kim tried to slit her wrists.

That was four months ago, when Stacy was two months old. I was working two jobs, one at Creative Landscaping and one at Copy Quick, and we had a room in a boardinghouse down on Hillsborough Street. But things were not going so good. For one thing, Kim's mom had cut her off, I mean entirely. She didn't call on the telephone, she didn't come over to see the baby.

"I might as well be *dead*," Kim said. She stuck out her full bottom lip and her pretty brown eyes filled with tears.

"You've got *me*," I said. Between us on the bed in the room on Hillsborough Street, Stacy cooed and cooed. She held on to my finger. Sirens were screaming out in the street.

Kim looked at me. "I can't live like this," she said all of a sudden. "I just can't." She started crying.

Later that week was when she tried to slit her wrists, with a Trac II razor thank God, so it didn't work too good. The social worker at the hospital said she might not of really meant it. He said we needed some additional support. He called Kim's mother but

even then she wouldn't talk on the phone to her daughter, heart of steel. Then Janice moved in the bedroom with Moma and we moved in with them, so Moma and Janice can watch the baby and Kim can get out some. Now Kim has got a part-time job at Tanfastic. But she still cries a lot, and she won't say why. The doctor says it is hormones, Moma says it's the blues. Anyway this is common, after a baby. It's been on TV. You can't blame Kim either. Her life is different from what it was. At her mother's house in Rocky Mount, for instance, they have five bedrooms and wall-to-wall carpet. I know this.

But Kim hasn't got it too bad since we moved over here. She put Stacy on a bottle so she's got her figure back, and she's real tan. She looks great. And she doesn't have to do a thing except play with Stacy and watch TV. It's a funny thing, before we got married, I did not have any idea that Kim watched so much TV. I used to read books all the time myself. I can read the hell out of a book. But Kim doesn't like for me to read too much, she says it makes her feel left out. I am mostly too tired now, anyway. Now what we do is, she watches TV and I watch her. Janice is dating somebody now, she's gone a lot. Moma is in her room. I lay on the couch watching Kim watch TV and little Stacy lays on my chest. Stacy loves this. She's a little doll. She has this funny snuffly breath and a sweet milk smell. Stacy is one of those real solid babies with a round head and big round eyes. Her cheeks stick out. Now she sits up by herself, it won't be long until she is all over the place, Moma says.

On Sundays when I'm off work, me and Kim will go for a long ride in the truck, we put Stacy in her carrier between us on the seat. We might drive over to Chapel Hill or Rocky Mount, eat some tacos. We might take all day and drive up on the Blue Ridge Parkway. I can't ever figure out how they got all those rocks up there, to build those walls along the Parkway. It is amazing. It looks good too. I love riding along like this, looking out at some scenery, looking over at Kim, looking down at Stacy just sleeping away. It makes Stacy sleep, to go riding.

It makes her sleep to lay on my chest too as I was saying, we do that most nights. Stacy will snuffle and hold on tight to my finger even when she's asleep. I look at Kim and her face is beautiful in the pale blue light of the TV. She watches TV real hard, like she's taking a class or something. Stacy snuffles. This is my fam-

ily. I am the man of the house.

Only, this morning something happened that worries me some, it's hard to say why. Me and Kim were on our way to work and we drove in the Biscuit Kitchen like always. Mornings are a drag because you've got so much to do then, Kim has got to spend plenty of time dressing because she's got to look real good for her job at Tanfastic. It's like, part of the job. So I get Stacy up and change her and give her a bottle. She's got these little yellow pajamas with rabbits on them. I fix Moma her Diet Pepsi and take it in there and put it on the nightstand for her when I wake her up, which is the last thing I do before we go out and get in the truck and head for the Biscuit Kitchen. It's early, foggy and misty all over Raleigh. The arc lights are still on in Cameron Village when we drive by there, they make a misty pink glow in the fog, like fairyland. We drive past NC State, we drive past St. Marys.

We get to Biscuit Kitchen and pull up to the speaker and Kim orders a Coke and a sausage biscuit. I order two biscuits with steak and onions and one ham biscuit and a big Sprite. I won't get a lunch break at Copy Quick until 1:30, don't ask me why, so I have to eat a lot. Also, I am still growing. Anyway, we've ordered these biscuits and we're just sitting there in the truck waiting for our turn to drive to the little window and get them. We are listening to this REM tape but all of a sudden Kim reaches out and ejects it. Kim is not what you call a morning person. I have got the hang of this now, I try not to say too much, just let her slide into the day.

"I had a dream about you last night," Kim says.

"Oh, yeah," I say. "Just what was I doing in this dream?" I ask. I reach over and feel of her.

Kim pushes my hand away but I can tell she likes it, she is smiling at me. "Something like that," she says. Kim is smiling very sexy at me, she looks great this morning.

I say "Hey!" all of a sudden because now I remember my dream, which I would not of remembered if Kim hadn't said that. Gran-Gran always said if you don't tell your dreams you will lose them, and I reckon I was about to do that, lose the dream I mean. But now I get upset, because it was an awful dream. I remember it all now. I'm looking at Kim. The dream comes clear as day. "I dreamed we were in a motel someplace, you and me," I tell her, "and this guy came in."

"What guy?" Kim asks. She looks very interested in my

dream.

"That's the weird part," I tell her. "I don't know the guy. I mean, I can't place him. I think I've seen him around, though. He looked kind of familiar."

"What does he look like?" Kim asks.

"Well he's kind of a big guy," I tell her, "with long hair and a moustache...."

"What color hair?" She interrupts me.

"Black," I say. "Definitely black. He looks like he might be part Indian or something, you know?"

Kim nods. She is looking at me the way she looks at TV. "Then what happened?" she asks.

"Hey." I start laughing. "Hey! This is *my* dream," I remind her. But the next part of the dream is hard to tell. "Well, what happens next is, this guy comes in the motel room, like I told you. We aren't doing anything in particular. We're just sitting there in this motel room."

"What's he wearing? The guy, I mean."

"A suit," I say. It all comes back to me like it was happening now. "Anyway he's got on this suit and he's a little bit older than we are, and for some reason, like I said, I kind of know him, it's like maybe I did a landscaping job for him or something, and so I say, 'Let me introduce you to my wife.'"

This is the bad part.

"But he says, 'We've already met.' Then he comes over and throws you down on the bed and starts kissing you like crazy."

"*What*?" Now Kim is staring at me in that skin-busting way I was telling you about before. Slowly, a big grin comes over her face and her cheeks turn red underneath her tan, like she's actually been caught in bed with this guy, like she is embarrassed.

Behind us in the line of cars, all these people start blowing their horns. So I throw the truck in gear and cruise up to the window and we get our biscuits and our drinks. All of this costs $7.41. Sun is breaking through the fog by the time I pull back out on Wade Avenue. While I'm driving up Wade Avenue I look over at Kim, her hair is all clean and shiny in the sunlight. Actually, she has got a lot of blond hairs and red hairs mixed in with the brown. She's eating her biscuit in tiny little bites. And she is still blushing, which makes me mad.

"Listen Kim," I say. "You didn't do anything. It wasn't

even your dream. It was *my dream*, remember?" Kim can tell I am getting upset now, so she slides over and gives me a big sexy kiss on the neck and puts her hand on my leg. "You silly," she says. We ride up Wade Avenue like that. I pull over in front of Tanfastic, and Kim gives me another kiss before she gets out of the truck. But I don't know. I still think she thinks it's her dream, and I still feel weird about it.

Fallen

Joy cannot find me here
Here where I wait in the damp darkness.
Deafened by a silence that pounds in my ear like a drum
I sit.
Hope cannot save me now.
Now, when I am lost in my own pool of solitude.
Drowning, weighted down by my heavy heart, my listless soul fails to keep me afloat.
I wait.
Love has done me no justice.
No, not while I waste away in the cold recesses of my own depraved mind.
My body numb with emotion.
My spirit lying tattered on the ground; banner that will no longer fly.
I pray
I sit, I wait, I pray.

Paste and Glue Romance

Copied the message of what's on my mind
to the center of my forehead.
Deny that you're still on my mind
but small font can still be read.

Forgot that I think without speaking
when you walked into the room.
Wish that I'd remembered,
to push "play" instead of "mute."

Didn't listen for a dial tone.
Just left a message after the beep.
Should have disconnected
before I let my nervous stutter speak.

Think my blink just might have winked.
Believe I laughed an octave too loud.
Curved my smile just an inch too much.
Forgot to turn them down.

Can't deny what's billboarded there
in black and white and glue.
When I've
copied
recorded
and pasted
my obvious love for you.

Heavenly, Part II

It's all a circle, you see.
The sky in the desert is a circle,
And the wheel on the road,
And the searing sun,
And the coin in the slot is a circle of silver.
The halo on the saint,
The village in the valley,
The great white ears listening, pricked up, to the circular stars,
Are as round as the round trip we make
On this spherical world.

The eyes we see with,
The mouths exclaiming surprise,
The embrace we share,
All circles.

As we looked around the round horizon,
We saw the biggest cross in the hemisphere,
And a cross is just the skeleton of a circle.
A round tower, leaning intentionally,
Would trace an arc if it fell.

Back to a place, and beyond it,
And over the rolling river five times before the clock read noon on its round face.
Running around in circles.
And around town.
Then back to where we started from
And back to where we started from.
The circle will remain unbroken, though it grow forever.

Cracking the Silence

"Kristin! Your dad just called! He's on his way and will pick you up in five minutes!" Her mother yelled from the living room, hanging up the cordless phone on the table besides the couch.

Inside her bedroom, Kristin smiled sardonically towards the door and shook her head. What did she care? Dad was always late in picking her up from home on their "nights out"; the times he wasn't late, he usually called to apologize and say the too-well-known words: "Honey, I'm sorry, but I have to work overtime again." Why should he care? He wasn't part of her life anyway; the day he chose to walk out the front door when she was ten, she had reached for the doorknob and closed her life's door to him, shutting him off from his daughter's world. Kristin sighed and pushed herself upright from her sprawled position on the bed. She crossed the small room and examined herself in the height-tall mirror that was hung on the back of the door. She ignored the freckles on her face and glanced at her dark red hair. Her hand tugged at the ends as if she was trying to stretch her hair so that it'd tumble past her shoulders. Her eyes traveled downward on the mirror and she gazed with satisfaction at the sight of her tight flared jeans and her black sweater. She'd picked this outfit with tonight in mind; wearing black usually helped her settle into the distant, somber mood she usually tried to keep herself under while in the presence of her dad. Let him wonder what his daughter was really thinking.

"Kristin! He's in the driveway!" Her mother's voice rang out cheerfully with a touch of faint hope. Kristin recognized her mother's tone of voice: it was the tone her mother used whenever her ex-husband came to pick up their daughter. Her mother still hoped father and daughter would bond on this visit, this time. But Kristin scorned the hope her mother stubbornly held onto. Dad had walked out, and he was out there to stay.

Another quick look in the mirror and she grabbed her black leather jacket. Her dad had once mentioned he thought all people who wore black leather jackets were a little off in the mind; just look at those lunatic bikers roaring down the highways in their firm, flapping black leather. She left her room and entered the living room, walking straight for
the front door. As she fumbled with the locks, her mother spoke up from the couch.

"Have fun. Don't be out too late." She smiled encouragingly.

Kristin rolled her eyes. The door unlocked and she stepped outside, pulling the door shut behind her. Cold air enveloped her and she breathed in sharply as a tinge of pleasure rose in her chest at the cold, invigorating air. The gray truck parked in the driveway quickened her heartbeat and secretly increased her pleasure. She tried to keep a noncommittal smile on her face, the look of a distant daughter who was doing her duty by going out with her father this weekend, but her feet hurried to the truck with barely restrained eagerness. Her father smiled broadly from the driver's window and his glad eyes followed her as she crossed in front of the truck and got in the passenger seat. The familiar smell of warm cigarette smoke and sun-bleached vinyl seats welcomed her again; the scents hadn't changed in the two weeks she hadn't been breathing them.

"Hey, honey. I sure have missed you." Her dad smiled and squeezed her knee. She returned the smile briefly and pulled her seatbelt across her lap. If he really missed her, then how come he didn't show up at her strings concert last Tuesday night? She had spent hours practicing on her cello, her callused fingers pressing the strings and her right arm aching from pulling the bow across the strings as the music lifted from the cello while she secretly daydreamed of impressing her dad at the concert. But of course, he hadn't shown up. He'd had to work.

"Ryan's okay with you? I'm in the mood for their buffet tonight."

"That's fine." They always ate at Ryan's on the Friday nights he picked her up for their twice-a-month fatherly/daughterly bonding time. He never tired of their salad bar and large selection of vegetables and meats. She never complained, though she often wished he'd pick somewhere else for a change.

Silence settled between Kristin and her dad as the gray truck carefully drove on Highway 123, weaving an irregular zigzagging path on the four lane road in the busy evening traffic. Kristin did not pay attention to the brightly lit restaurants lining the highway; the moment she'd gotten inside the truck, her world had shrunk and was confined within the walls of the truck. From the corner of her eye she observed her father's worn jeans and his clean white T-shirt. His sunburned freckled arms contrasted sharply with the fresh white shirt. His dark red hair had been combed back earlier but the cold air rushing inside the truck from the rolled down windows had ruffled his hair. Aging lines crinkled the corners of his eyes. He looked like a weary man who had cleaned up after a day at the mill but wasn't able to wipe the tiredness off his face. Kristin saw this, but said nothing. Occasionally he would give her quick side glances, but neither of them said anything. The silence was as familiar to them as the long absences from each other, the bare conversations, and the reminders of the past. It was a silence neither enjoyed, but it was a necessary silence. To break the silence would mean to disrupt the fragile peace that barely existed between father and daughter. To push the silence out the windows of the truck, Kristin's anger and pain over her father's departure would have had to rush furiously over her father's sense of failure in his role as a father and his quiet regret over losing Kristin's rapidly diminishing childhood. But neither said anything. The old silence was kept and guarded within the rumbling truck as Kristin stared out the window and pretended she didn't notice her father's occasional side glances.

They pulled into the crowded parking lot of Ryan's and got out of the truck. They entered the restaurant behind a family of three and joined the line of hungry customers. Kristin stood beside her dad and watched the man in front of them cradle a two-year-old boy in one arm. His other arm was draped across the shoulders of a smiling, petite woman. Kristin glanced at her dad and he smiled at her. She looked away pointedly and watched the two-year-old enthusiastically pat his hands on his father's chest. She faintly remembered her father chasing her throughout the trailer, laughing youthfully as she, then a small child of no more than six, ran around him in circles. The man kissed the two-year-old soundly on the cheek and squeezed the woman fondly to his side. Kristin's father grasped her shoulder awkwardly and squeezed. She tensed her

shoulder, half expecting him to give her one of those sorry-I'm-such-a-lousy-father looks. Instead he asked,

"What are you going to order?"

She relaxed and replied, "The usual. The buffet."

A few moments later they sat down with their plates heaped with meats and vegetables. Her father cleared his throat with a thick cough and waited until Kristin looked up from her plate. She saw his crinkled forehead and knew he was about to tell her something difficult. The last time he'd looked that way, he'd dropped the bomb on her. I'm going away for a long time. Your mother and I are getting divorced. I won't see you as much as before, but I want you to know I'll always love you...

"What?" she asked. Her voice was low and guarded. Her hand held her fork above the macaroni and cheese in mid-air. Her eyes held her father's uneasy eyes, waiting.

"I...I know I haven't been around much. But...I want to try again." His eyes held hers earnestly and he reached across the table as if to grasp her hand. She stiffened and he dropped his hand on the table, just an inch from her plate.

"I want to try again," he said.

"What do you mean, try again?"

He pushed his plate to the side and fidgeted with his hands. His hands were callused from repairing machinery and working with wood. His fingernails were thick and dirty, oil smudges underneath the tips. A thick, mean-looking pink cut was healing on his right thumb. He cleared his throat again.

"I only get to see you every other Friday night. I know a lot of times I've had to work overtime at the mill and have had to cancel our nights together. But I've been thinking lately and I want to try again."

Kristin looked down at her plate. The bright yellow macaroni and cheese lay on her plate, half-eaten. He wanted to try again? But how many times had he not been there for her? Concerts, dance recitals, birthday parties, family get-togethers--Where's your father? He had to work. It's okay, I'll see him next weekend anyway. But sometimes she didn't. And when she did, the door was still closed. He knew she went to Gettys Middle School, but he didn't know the names of her friends. He didn't know what she was like when he wasn't there. He didn't know his daughter was an outgoing girl whose friends were mostly guys who

occasionally got her into trouble. He just remembered her as a little girl who loved to read books, curled up on the couch in the trailer he'd once shared with her and her mom. He didn't know--

"From now on, I'm going to do better. I'm going to make it a point to see you every time I can get you and...I want us to communicate better with each other."

He took a breath and looked at her hopefully, his eyes trying to make contact with Kristin's. She refused to look at him.

"Kristin?"

Silence. The bright yellow macaroni and cheese lay on her plate, half-eaten. Her hand had released the fork and now her hand rested in her lap. Her shoulders were taut and her back was rim-rod straight.

Last week's concert. Applause ringing in her ears, but she was looking for a man with dark red hair in the audience. Looking for someone too busy to show up.

She looked at her fork. It was silver with smudges of cheese smeared on the tips where her tongue had missed licking it clean. Her father's hand was still there on the table in front of her plate; he still hadn't dared to touch her.

Her mother and father arguing loudly. She couldn't remember what that fight had been about. Her dad hurling the paper plate of french fries across the kitchen at her mom who screamed in outrage and jumped back against the refrigerator.

Her father cleared his throat with another thick cough. Someday the cigarettes would kill him. Her eyes moved to his hand on the table, an inch from her plate. There was distance even between his hand and her plate, just as there had always been distance between him and her.

Dad, I made an A on my project! Congratulations, honey. Well-done. But he hadn't bothered to glance at the elaborately built model bridge she'd spent hours working on.

Her eyes traveled along his still hand on the table and up his sunburned, freckled arm. His arm was well-toned, the muscles relaxed for now. He worked too hard at the mill. A workaholic.

Have you gotten anything for your dad for Father's Day? I made my dad a tie. Shrugging her best friend's question away and pretending she had forgotten about Father's Day. It was just a dumb holiday, anyway.

His white shirt, upon closer inspection, had a few specks

of yellowish vegetable juice splashed across the chest. He wasn't the neatest person in the world, but neither was she.

She finally met his eyes. His eyes were pleading. He was trying to smile, but his lips faltered as he saw her hard eyes.

She held his gaze a moment longer, then dropped her eyes.

Running in the field of tall, dead weeds. The wind strong and frisky. The kite of many colors flying high and strong above her and Dad. They were laughing. Careful, now. Don't let go of the string. Let it fly but keep it close by. The kite soaring in the blue, winter sky.

Something was struggling inside her chest, trying to get out. She knew without looking at him across the table that she loved her father. But she also knew she could only have her confidence in her father battered so many times before she locked the door of her life to him permanently. There was something she needed to know, something she needed to ask him. But it would break that old familiar silence between them. It would crack the silence apart. Conflicting emotions of anger, pain, and stubborn love struggled in her chest. She stabbed the macaroni and cheese with her fork with a desperate, forceful motion and forced her eyes to meet her father's.

"Why do you want to try again?" she said carefully, her voice ragged.

Her father's shoulders sank low momentarily at the hostility in Kristin's voice, but then he quickly straightened up and leaned closer to the table. He cleared his throat before answering.

"Because I love you. You're my daughter and I love you."

She stiffened at the familiar line. He always said that. When would he start acting like it and be the father she needed him to be?

He saw her cynical expression and quickly continued, "I've found a cheap place on the other side of Easley to live in. Yes, I'm still working at the mill, but now I'll be closer to you and we can spend more time together. What do you think?"

Kristin recalled the cold, dingy apartment her father had been living in for the past two years on the other side of Greenville, opposite to the mill's location. She disliked staying there on the rare weekends her father had her; she felt like a stranger sleeping on the cold mattress on the floor, the paint peeling from the gray ceiling. It depressed her that her father lived in this dismal, cold place while her own home was warm and cheerful.

She nodded her approval. Maybe this new place would be better than that old apartment. Maybe he really was serious about spending more time with her. But time would tell.

He sighed with relief. His hand reached out and covered her hand.

"I love you, honey."

She didn't reply, but nodded again. Let him prove himself. She would watch and wait, see if he kept this promise. He let go of her hand and she picked up her fork. As she lifted the fork to her mouth and tasted the cold macaroni and cheese, he began telling her about the new place.

"It has two small bedrooms with good furniture already in them. The place has a pretty backyard with a tire swing hanging from one of the big trees. I think you'd like that swing..."

Kristin listened intently, but in her mind she was seeing the rusty, neglected swing set hunched in the backyard where she and her mother lived. She tried to imagine the tire swing her dad was enthusiastically describing to her, but she could only envision that rusty old swing set neglected at home. But she continued to listen intently to her father's glowing descriptions of the new place, cautiously holding onto the hope that things might get better in the long run.

Thank God for the Choices

How long will you suffer before the suffering makes no sense...
And how long will you go on before your senses are all but spent...
You can try and release it, try to just let it go...
Then one day you realize, it's just not worth the effort anymore.
When you're worn out and weary, your torn heart just can't seem to let go...
But it's time to release it, just turn loose and let go.
In life we make choices, we have to deal with the forces beyond our control...
How long will we suffer, before we choose to recover what's left of our soul?
We must learn to forgive ourselves for mistakes we've made...
We must make restitution in our heart, before it's too late.
The choices we've made, whether they're right or they're wrong...
We must learn to forgive ourselves, we must learn to move on.
And once we forgive we must never forget that moment in time and have no regrets.
For God teaches that once there's forgiveness the sin is no more...
It's gone forever and cast out the door.
As far as the east from west, it's gone out of sight...
We must learn to release it and give up the fight.
In life we make choices and sometimes we lose...
But never forget, God gives us the right to choose...
Thank God that he gives us the free will to choose...
And thank God for the lessons in life when we lose.
For without the lessons in life, then how would we grow...
How would we learn, it's God we must know.
Thank God for the choices!

Southern Translations

We rented a rough-skinned, stucco house
on a manicured lot, hemmed in
by a chain-linked fence and sidewalk.
I was a foreigner in this paradise
of pebble gardens, palm trees and cactus.

The Latino neighbors were the first
to welcome us with Aztec offerings,
chicken and beef wrapped in corn and flour
tortillas, winter strawberries raised
in this winterless California basin.

The Marinos understood my fear
and loneliness, the need to speak the music
of home. They let the rhythmic drawl
of my Southern voice blend with the singing
cascade of theirs, a melody that rolled

and tumbled through my head in a game of tag,
words jumping over hedges, gliding
through the air, touching, darting away again.
Like moss hanging heavy on a Cyprus,
green tips brushing the surface of a river,

this Spanish Creole sent ripples into
the flow of my language, transposing tones
into a fluid fable with each passing wave,
turning words into stories I never
knew – voices of the South in Mexico.

Lily

Early mornings, while others sleep, soft
breathing heavy in the air, I watch her roll
out dough, sun sifting through powdered clouds.

It is a ritual, a communion
with memories, the lidless tin can carrying
out circles that leave the edges connected

Like the births of eight children, her first, born
in the moss-lined bedding, a girl, with dark eyes,
and high, generous forehead, like her mother.

And seven more she pulled, as a string of pearls
through time. Now, as she works, she whistles,
Runs riffing between measured lines, minor keys,

a smooth rhyme round and mellow like her hips.
I listen, and dream of warm biscuits drenched
In sorghum and butter running down my chin.

Truth Be Told

I looked down at my hands. The red mittens almost swallowed them whole; they were so small now. I could see the headlights of Caleb's car as they pulled up to the bridge. I don't know why the hell I chose this place, so cold out tonight. Oh yes I do. This is where we first met. How could I forget that? His car door slammed shut, and I watched him walk through the beams of light toward me. He was so beautiful, so perfect. I didn't know what he was wasting his time with me for. Don't think like that for one damn moment! Ok, here goes. I have to do this. Pull yourself together Sam!

"Damn it's cold tonight!"

Caleb walked over to me, blew on his hands, and rubbed them together to emphasize his declaration. I didn't respond. I leaned further over the railing to examine the white snow swirling against the dark backdrop of the water. I can't do this. I can't. Why did I ever think that I could tell him? Just come right out and say it?

"So." He inched closer to my side as though he would reach out for me. "Can you talk to me now, or do you still need time?"

I brushed my hair back behind my ear, letting my fingers linger on my neck. I gave a small, unnoticeable tug to assure its security. I didn't know what to say.

"I'm not sure if I can or not. I really don't think that you will understand. I don't think that you ever could."

He drew a deep breath, as if my statement hurt him.

"Ok, well..." He didn't wait to see if I had anything else to say at that point. I had to think quickly, before he left and didn't come back this time.

"Wait!"

I thought my cry had become lost in the howling winds; he kept walking. His car was at the end of the bridge, still running.

He swung back toward me. I couldn't tell what he was thinking; it frightened me. Chills ran down my back, but I didn't know if they were real or imagined. It was so cold. I shouldn't have been out there for so long. You must have a death wish! Ok mom, shut up. She could be right this time. Caleb walked back in my direction, but he stopped a few feet away and just looked at me.

"Wait? Wait for what? For you? That's all I have ever done Sam; wait for you. Well I am tired of waiting for you to get your shit together. I can't do it anymore. You know we shouldn't even be out here like this. We should be laughing, talking, holding each other, anything but doing this again."

I wanted to run to his arms, but I couldn't. I wanted to sob huge tears onto his shoulder, and let him whisper that everything would be OK. But I knew it could never be OK. I was such a waste, such a worn-out, useless, broken thing. If Caleb knew the truth, he would realize that, too. But, now I was losing him anyway. He looked at me, his eyes piercing down into my very heart. For a minute, I thought I saw a tear creep onto his frozen cheek. I moved closer, putting my arms out to him. I wanted to embrace him, but I stopped. His face went blank. My arms fell to my sides.

"I can't make you change your mind this time can I?"

"Not unless you can be honest with me. Can you do that, Sam? Can you share every part of your life with me? I know you like to keep your secrets, and I don't want to take away too much of your privacy, but if something is going on you should be able to tell me. Dammit! Don't keep me in the dark Sam."

"I..." I stopped myself. I couldn't tell him.

"Then I guess I have my answer. I just wish you could trust me. God, you have no idea how much you've hurt me just now."

He lowered his head in response. This time I could see the tear roll down his cheek. My knees buckled under me and I sank into the snow, my hands covering my face as I wept. I didn't hear him walking away. I didn't hear his car pull away from the bridge. I just heard the sound of my own anguish as I sat there weeping. If I had told him, he would have never left me like that; in the cold, windy night with nothing to protect me. But what if he decided that I was too much for him to worry about. No one wants to have to take care of someone forever. Well, no one but my mother.

I don't know how long I stayed like that. Seconds, min-

utes, hours. Time was of no use to me. When I opened my eyes, he was gone. The night had enveloped me, and the snowflakes had begun to fall much harder. I grabbed for the railing of the bridge and pulled myself up. I let my upper body lean over the edge as far as it would go, supporting my weight while my frozen legs recovered.

I really shouldn't be out here in the cold. My face was numb, I couldn't feel the tears cascading, falling into the blackness of the river. I could see that the city across the water was still very dark, and the snow was still falling over there as well. Or had it stopped and started again? I couldn't tell. I could just barely make out the tire prints from Caleb's car. Either way it was freezing, so I knew I'd have to make my way back home, or somewhere warm. I inched toward the other end of the bridge, the powder crunching under my boots as I went. I clutched my hands together and blew into them, but my breath held very little warmth. I started to become afraid. Could it end like this? Out here, alone? No. Remember, your last report was good. Your body has grown so strong. That's what the doctor said.

I had sat in that cold room for what felt like an eternity. How long could it take a doctor to give you test results anyway? I made mother sit out in the waiting room, even through her protests. I wanted to be alone when I found out. Finally, a short, balding man walked through the door, holding my charts in his hand. I knew the thick folder was only for this year, and just for lab results.

"Well, Samantha. I am happy to inform you that you are in remission my dear. The last biopsy shows no signs of leukemia anywhere, and your vitals are getting back up to healthy levels."

I thought I was dreaming. How, after these past three years of pain and suffering could it all just disappear? I didn't have to say a word to mother, she knew by my tears that it was good news. But, the good news didn't stop her from trying to baby me still. Don't forget your coat, wear an extra scarf, get plenty of sleep, don't stay out too late. You're not better, yet you know! No, I'm not am I? What the hell was I doing out in a night like this? I reached my car after what seemed like an eternity. I didn't know where I should go. To mother's? Oh, God no. All I needed was to sit through another lecture about how right she always is and how I should have listened to her. Funny, but this time I think she actually was right. Janie? No, she's still on her cruise. Just like a sister, when you need

her she's on a boat somewhere probably bed hopping with some cabin boys. Must be nice to be able to go where you want, do what you want (or who you want for that matter). Janie had always been the lucky one, the perfect one, the one without any problems. I started up the car, and pulled away from the bridge.

I decided to go home. No use in letting Mother find out about this, she'd probably have me committed. She's probably already called Mr. Fitzgerald. Poor guy probably wishes he had never leased the apartment to me. My landlord had made a special arrangement with me so I could park my car in the alley beside my apartment. I guess it was his way of looking out for me or something. I guess there are some perks to this shitty life. He had seemed so different when he found out. Afraid to shake my hand, or let me carry my own damn groceries, like it would break me. But, that's nothing unusual.

Walking up the three flights to my door sure got the blood flowing back into my frozen extremities. I figured I'd live through the night. I can tell that my body is getting stronger. A year ago I would have been dead already, staying out like that. I jingled my keys in the door. A trick my mother said would scare away any burglars that might be in my apartment. Yeah, I never believed it, but for some reason I did it out of habit. I looked through the dark void and found the light switch. I had never felt so alone in my life. I thought that's what I had wanted.

"Hello Felix." A black mass of fur began to wrap itself around my legs over and over.

He looked up at me as if to ask where I had been. God! Even my cat tries to take care of me! I trudged to my answering machine, peeling off layers as I went. Two messages. Please let one of them be from him.

Beep.

"Samantha, it's your mother. You know the one who gave birth to you. You haven't called me in days. I am worried about you! I even called your father and asked if you had called him and he said "no you hadn't" so I am hoping you will..." Stop.

Beep.

"Sam? Sam please pick up the phone. I know you're there. Well ok, maybe your not. Ok so please call my cell when you come in. This cruise is so fabulous; I can't believe they wouldn't let you come on a boat. But you know how doctors can be. And they have

a wonderful nurse onboard too. You would have been just fine. Oh, I'm sorry Sam. I didn't mean to bring it back up.
Well I love you sis, take care."

Erase. Perfect. I shuffled to the mirror.

"I shouldn't have stayed out in the cold so long."
I rubbed my cheeks with my fingers. They still felt icy to the touch. My hand brushed through my hair, and this time it held on and tugged. My wig fell right into my hand, reminding me again that it wasn't a part of me. Tiny, fuzzy hairs were still clinging on for dear life up there, but that couldn't even cheer me up tonight. I touched them very gently, feeling their frailness. I wanted to cry, but I then again I didn't. I didn't see the point to it.

"God, why didn't I just tell him?" My head felt so light in my hands, so much lighter than it used to. I looked up at myself. Sunken eyes, shallow complexion, thin cheeks, no hair, I didn't even look human. I wrapped my head in a scarf and went into the living room. I plopped down onto the couch and watched the dust swirls fly into the air. It came from Mother's basement, my father's attempt to say "sorry" for all the crap mother gave me about moving out on my own. It was his couch anyway. I wish that he were still around sometimes. Even though he only lives a hundred miles away in Cleveland, I feel detached from him.

I still feel like a child around him. I wish I could curl up into his lap and feel safe. No, I don't. Not really. Felix crawled up into my lap. I let him nuzzle close and felt him purr incessantly. I remember when I got him. Caleb had... Caleb gave him to me as a present. Why? Oh, I remember. It was when I got sick and had to go to the hospital again. I was so good at keeping secrets that he never had guessed why. I told him that I had forgotten to get a flu shot and had gotten too dehydrated. I couldn't believe that he bought that bullshit story. The day I got to come home, there was a little box sitting against my door and in it was Felix. Caleb had waited all day for me. Stop saying his name. You'll never be able to have him. You can't unless you tell him your secret. And you know you won't. Why did doubts in my mind always sound like my mother's voice!

"You know Sam, the reason your father left..."

"Mom, I don't really feel like discussing this today, if you don't..."

"Well, It's time that you knew the truth, so please sit

replay button.

Beep. Fast forward... I hope that you give me a call before I have to leave. I know that everything didn't go so well tonight. I called Caleb, hoping that you were there. We talked for a while. I think you need to talk to him. Anyway, I truly love you baby, and I am proud of you.

I looked at the phone again. My eyes started to sting with tears, and a hot lump formed in my throat. I punched the buttons fiercely. He had to be home by now, almost 3am. Ringing... Ringing... Ringing... he's not home! "Please record a message after the beep."

"Uh... Caleb. Hi, it's me...I.."

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK. I stopped and turned to the door. I let the phone fall back onto the table. A tight knot formed in my stomach. I walked over and looked out, but I couldn't see anyone.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

My fingers weren't cold anymore but they were a different kind of numb this time. I fumbled with the locks; I wished I had the strength to rip the door off its hinges. The door opened and saw that face staring back at me. He looked different, very different. My wig! I reached up for my head and touch instead on the scarf, covering my terrible truth. Tears began to well up in my eyes. I could feel a lump forming hot in my throat. Caleb stretched his hand up and stroked my cheek. He knew. He knew and he was still standing there. But, why? He wasn't in shock at the sight of me. He knew before he got here. How did he know? I looked puzzled as I stared at him.

"Your mother called."

It clicked, I hadn't even thought about it. So, my mother was intent on doing everything for me. But, I think only the things she knew I couldn't do on my own.

"I, I know. Caleb, I'm so sorry...I wanted to tell you...but..."

"Shhhh. Please, don't. Just come here."

I couldn't hold the tears back any more and I fell into his embrace. All this time wasted, but it was ok now. I didn't have to wonder anymore, I just knew. He was crying to. I could feel his tears falling hot on the back of my neck as he held me. I looked up

at the skylight above us. The snow was falling again. I wondered if it was snowing in Cleveland. I couldn't wait to call mom. But, not now. No, not now. Don't want to ruin this moment. No, this perfect moment. I wish it would last forever. Time stood still again, but this time I didn't mind.

Untitled

tonight the house dark
moonlight sneaks through unblinded windows
ocean breeze
draws the smell of my sweat
out our backdoor
into her bedroom

knowing this house too well to avoid darkness
i walk naked
seeking answers in dark corners
breaking moonlight with a door
i enter all our rooms, and
find them all empty

My Father Learns to Speak (Again)

When you left the Appalachian farm for
New Haven you were afraid they would

brand you before they knew you, and
for months you didn't open your mouth

in class or in public, surviving by not
speaking at all. The hours you spent

studying theology were far fewer than the
hours you practiced speech deep into

early morning darkness, shortening vowels
by pulling imaginary strings on your tongue,

extending dipthongs by tucking your jawbone
like a soldier at attention, learning how to

erase your South Midland dialect so you
wouldn't sound like a slow strum across

Uncle Rickman's banjo strings. For the most
part you succeeded. But since you've turned

sixty I can hear mountains in your voice again,
like when you holler at basketball games or

when you call from the garage for something
cool to drink. I wonder now what you were

ashamed of, what piece of your soul needed
denying, but I am glad you were finally

ordained in New Haven because it meant
you were able to baptize me, and marry me,

and I would even let you bury me as long as
your promised to speak like you did when

you were a young man with a cowlick and
calloused hands, safe in the valley between

those mountains you so desperately wanted
to leave behind.

Lee Adams is a senior photojournalism major. His photography has been published in the *Shelby Star*, *Lincoln-Times News*, *The Web* magazine and *The Pilot* for Gardner-Webb University, and has had photos displayed at Cleveland Community College, the Cleveland County Administration Building, the Cleveland County Library, the Cleveland County Arts Council, and the Broad River Coffee Company.

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Chuck Bridges is a graduate student in English from Kings Mountain, North Carolina. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a degree in journalism. Bridges has had several poems published before and enjoys the outdoors, backpacking, and kickboxing.

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Brian Robertson is from Fairfax, Virginia. He is a senior English major who plans to pursue a career as a writer and teacher. Robertson likes playing guitar, mandolin, and listening to the Grateful Dead. This is his first published poem.

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Lee Smith is the author of many books, including the novel *Oral History* and the story collections *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* and *News of the Spirit*, both New York Times Notable Books. Her awards include the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award and the 1999 Academy Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She grew up in Grundy, Virginia, graduated from Hollins University, and now lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Smith's newest novel, *The Last Girls*, was published in 2002.

Julie Suk's recent poems have been published in *The Chariton Review*, *Chelsea Review*, and *The Laurel Review*, among others. Her latest book, *The Angel of Obsession*, won The Arkansas University Press Poetry Series Award. She lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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